

From: [Allen, Bob \(PCS\)](#)
To: [Miller, Garyg](#)
Subject: FW: Houston Press on well water tests for dioxin
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From: O'Rourke, Terence (CAO)
Sent: Friday, July 08, 2016 11:44 AM
To: O'Rourke, Terence (CAO)
Cc: Ryan, Vince (CAO); Soard, Robert (CAO); Odam, John (CAO); 'Susan Hays'; Owens, Rock (CAO); Allen, Bob (PCS); Bautista, Itzel (CAO); Kevin Dunn (kdunn@bigpowerfulmedia.com)
Subject: Houston Press on well water tests for dioxin

San Jacinto River Waste Pits and Finds Dioxin

FRIDAY, JULY 8, 2016 AT 8 A.M.
BY [DIANNA WRAY](#), houston press

Harris County Public Heath recently warned people living near the San Jacinto River Waste Pit Superfund site to avoid drinking tap water after dioxin, a known carcinogen, was detected in groundwater wells near the Channelview site. Along the way, the county became the first government agency to actually test the area groundwater wells for dioxins.

The moment was a small victory for Jackie Young, the head of San Jacinto River Coalition, and a former resident of Highlands, the town where most of the contaminated wells are located.

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits have been nestled on the edge of the San Jacinto River for decades, a forgotten remnant of the toxic sludge pumped out of a Pasadena paper mill that were packed into barges, shipped downriver and stored in pits dug on the lip of the river throughout the 1960s.

In 2005 state officials discovered – or maybe just finally noticed – the pits. Then the federal Environmental Protection Agency followed up and determined tons of hazardous waste, including dioxin, a highly potent known carcinogen that has also been tied to various health



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issues and birth defects, had been slowly leaking out of the pits for years. The EPA put caps on the toxic mess and proclaimed the 14-acre area a Superfund site in 2008. EPA officials say there's no safe level of exposure to these chemicals, which include a large amount of dioxins.

Young and her family lived in the area for years before she began to suspect the seizures she suffered from, the skin lesions and the inexplicable shaking in her hands were caused by the water coming out of the tap. As we've [previously reported](#), she was studying environmental geology at the University of Houston-Clear Lake when she tested the water from her family's well and found it had a consistently higher-than-average pH level. Her family shut down the well and started using bottled water. Young got IV chelation treatment, an expensive alternative toxicology therapy proven to be effective in heavy-metal poisoning, and began to recover.

Most people living in the river-bottom communities of Highlands and Channelview didn't hear about the waste pits until 2011, Young says. Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan joined forces with the state and sued three major corporations — International Paper, Waste Management of Texas and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corporation — for polluting the San Jacinto River.

From there, Young has long argued that it would make sense to go from looking at river pollution to examining the area drinking water, but most of the government entities she's approached haven't seen it that way.

First, she contacted the EPA, explaining the tests she had run on her own on her family's well water and how her family's home was close to the dioxin-laden waste pits. Michael Schaffer, the director of the Environmental Public Health Division of Harris County Public Health, says the EPA initially wasn't concerned about groundwater wells near the site. “Early on the EPA was asked to conduct tests; however, their subject matter experts felt it was unnecessary based on the data they had,” Schaffer stated.

Still, Young and other area residents kept raising concerns and asking the EPA to check out what was in the water. In 2013 the EPA tested six wells in the area, including Young's. Initially, she was thrilled, but the federal agency didn't even look for dioxins in the water. And they didn't highlight this information when they discussed the test results in public, she says. “At the next community meeting the EPA announced everything was okay. But they didn't say that they didn't even test for dioxin,” Young says. “If you don't test for it of course

it won't show up.”

The same thing happened with the Texas Department of State Health Services. Young says she urged the officials conducting the risk assessment on the San Jacinto River Superfund Site to look at area groundwater wells and test for dioxin, but the report didn't even mention the wells.

Federal environmental regulators still haven't actually looked for dioxins in local groundwater, she says. Last year, the EPA started to set up a system to test groundwater wells, but the system has yet to be completed. (We've asked EPA officials for comment on this and we'll update as soon as they get back to us.)

Meanwhile, Ryan's case against the corporations moved through the court system. Ultimately, the parties made a deal, with two of the companies agreeing to pay about \$29 million in civil penalties for dioxin contamination. (The third company was cleared of any responsibility by a split jury.) The state and Harris County split the settlement money – although the state has handed its share over to Harris County, as [we've recently reported](#) – and part of Harris County's share of the money was earmarked to test area groundwater wells.

Harris County Public Health officials opted to conduct the tests, which cost \$190,000, because, well, that's what people wanted, according to Schaffer. “Harris County conducted the testing based upon constituents expressing they didn't feel the water was safe,” Schaffer stated in an email response to *Houston Press* questions. “While there was no evidence to support that, the county felt it was in the best interest of those residents.”

Harris County Public Health sent out letters earlier this year asking residents with registered groundwater wells in the area if they wanted their water tested. From April 19 to April 25 they collected samples from 100 wells. They found dioxins in the water samples.

Harris County's initial findings revealed dioxins in the water samples, the first government-funded test to confirm what Young has been sure of for so long. “This testing really should have been done by the EPA and the responsible parties should have been made to pay for it,” Young says. “It's unfortunate that our county government had to spend funds recovered from a lawsuit over the damages to our waterways but nobody else was jumping on this, so the county did.”

However, there was a slight hitch in the testing process because at least some of the water well samples were accidentally contaminated in the lab. The lab analyzing the samples also had the chemical pentachlorophenol (another nasty, highly toxic carcinogen) in the same

area.

That may not sound like a big deal, but pentachlorophenol (aka PCP) can potentially interfere with the sample readings, making the testing outcomes inconclusive. At least 24 samples were definitely contaminated with PCP so officials started getting new samples on Thursday. They'll get the results in three weeks.

Still, despite the contamination issue, Harris County Public Health took the precaution of sending out a round of letters warning area residents to stick to bottled water for the time being.

Considering the risks that come with exposure to dioxins, Young was thrilled that county officials decided to warn people despite the chance the retesting could end up having different results. "Nobody should have to go through the things that people living around there are having to go through," she says, noting that her father and a number of other people have gotten cancer they believe is connected to the water.

She only wishes the warnings had gone farther, that they'd instructed people to stop using the water entirely, she says.

Sister, the family dog, died on Wednesday. "It was awful. Her body was riddled with tumors. She swam in the San Jacinto River near our place in Highlands every single day that we lived there."